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"A dominating feature of a wild landscape" – The power landscape of Eggborough

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The profession of landscape architecture experienced a major shift in the UK after the Second World War, both in complexity and in the scale of projects. As the highly influential designer Sylvia Crowe claimed:

*"Before the war landscape design was confined almost entirely to the creation of gardens and parks; even if some industry called in a landscape architect it was with the idea of creating a garden round their buildings. [...] Gradually this is changing: the pressure of population, transport and economics is upsetting the balance of great areas of landscape, and it is evident that positive design is needed to restore them to a state of balance."*¹

This shift from garden design to landscape planning and from the idea of creating a 'garden round the buildings' to designing large scale landscapes that accommodated complex new structures, typologies and activities created new challenges and opportunities for the relatively young profession.

The building of a large number of coal-fired power stations after 1945 in perceptibly rural areas of the UK triggered vast changes in the appearance of the landscape. The large structures and extensive building sites that 'invaded the countryside',² altered the conditions of landscapes that were previously perceived as rural, or even natural. The newly nationalised Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) recognised this. Within their official communications and through the appointment of influential landscape designers they defined a novel and considered approach towards landscape architecture, associated with the infrastructure of coal fired power production. As they declared the CEGB was "the modern patron of landscaping art"³ and compared themselves to the landlords of the large-scale English landscape gardens of the 18th and 19th centuries. The impact of the work of the designers appointed by the board was considered analogous to the influence of Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton. The landscape surrounding Eggborough Power Station initially designed by Brenda Colvin and finished by Colvin and Hal Moggridge is one key example of how this approach had highly successful outcomes.

The influential landscape architect Brenda Colvin (1897-1981) was trained in garden design at the Swanley Horticultural College for Women. She set up her own practice in 1922, and for a period of time shared an office with Sylvia Crowe. Colvin was founding member of the Institute of Landscape Architects and became its first female president in 1951 (the second female president was Crowe between 1957 and 1959). Colvin clearly saw the important new aspect of the profession. She expected that

*"[o]ur power stations, oil refineries, factories and water-works must take their place, in time, with the pyramids, castles and temples of the past. Perhaps they may succeed, visually at least, if something more than sheer materialism enters into their making. Some care for their effect on their surroundings – at least some simple recognition of man's place in nature and of his responsibility to the land and to the future – is needed."*⁴

She also understood the very different scales and therefore different approaches that industrial sites needed as opposed to private gardens or public parks. As she wrote, these

¹ Crowe, S 'Buckingham Talk' unpublished. MERL AR CRO SP4/2.

² Crowe, S. (1958) *Landscapes of Power*, London: Architectural Press

³ CEGB: *Power and the Countryside*. CEGB London: 1965

⁴ Colvin, B. (1970) *Land and Landscape* (London: John Murray, 1970) p.344.

sites *"need not attempt to compete with urban parks or garden standards"*, and the methods of forestry and agriculture were more important than 'garden type' maintenance.⁵ Colvin was exceptionally talented at both scales, exemplified by her work at Eggborough.

Eggborough Power Station was built between 1962 and 1970 as part of a series of coal-fired power stations cooled by the tributaries of the Humber. While designing the landscape, Colvin envisaged the power station to become a "dominating feature of the wild landscape", visible from huge distances, due to the level agricultural landscape of east Yorkshire.⁶ The treatment of designed scene had to address the colossal scale of the newly built infrastructure and somehow relate it to the existing landscape. Colvin aimed to achieve this through two main components: planting and the treatment of levels. The broad planting was supposed to horizontally balance the vertical height and mass of the building and thus provide an appearance of stability. Subsoil, excavated from the underground parts of the buildings, and waste materials from the construction were used to create a long, flowing bank, planted with trees and shrubs. This screened lower elements such as the railway, sub-station and parking areas, and created an emphasis on the main structures of the power station, including the iconic cooling towers. Further screening was created by the mass planting of trees: 100' wide belts were planted along the boundary road and the north side of the site. To achieve significant screening early on, Colvin recommended the transfer of mature trees from nearby Crow Wood and Fryston Hall woods.⁷

Beside creating an aesthetically pleasing complex, the designers put a strong emphasis on the functional side of the project as well. The construction site itself was much larger than the operational site after the building works were completed. The proposal, in line with other writings by Colvin, put a huge emphasis on the land use and restoration after the completion of the buildings. To give back parts of the area to the communities working on and living around the stations was a key objective. In the case of Eggborough, playing fields, such as rugby and football grounds, bowls hockey and tennis courts and a cricket pitch were created, along with a small golf course. Twelve years after the restoration works, the ground was suitable for the creation of allotment gardens as well. According to the landscape proposals, any other areas were supposed to be given over to agriculture or woodland to ensure economic maintenance.

Colvin's approach towards the landscape was complex and exemplary. Instead of an abandoned site around a major infrastructural ensemble, the restored grounds around the station in Eggborough became at the same time captivating, economic and served the communities. The curated views of the architectural elements, set in a beautifully created landscape refer back to the greatest traditions of the English landscape gardens, but with a truly modern(ist) twist.

The images accompanying this essay were taken by the designers at the time of the completion of the landscape works. They aimed to illustrate the main design principles, and we publish these with their original comments, preserved in the archives of the Landscape Institute, held at the Museum of English Rural Life in Reading.

⁵ Landscape Management of Large Industrial Sites – Note by Brenda Colvin, September, 1968. Manuscript, MERL AR CRO A 2/2

⁶ Colvin, B (1962) Preliminary Landscape Proposal. Manuscript. MERL AR CRO A 2/2

⁷ Colvin, B (1962) Preliminary Landscape Proposal. Manuscript. MERL AR CRO A 2/2

1. Excavated material from the foundations of the power station were used to form banks screening the coal store and other inevitably untidy items from view. Trees and shrubs planted on the banks form a broad base to the whole complex, and help to unite in a single group the huge vertical structures of cooling tower and chimney.
2. Plantation of pines and deciduous trees, planted closely to form woodland which will eventually become self-maintaining and may produce some timber return, though this main function is visual.
3. A close-up view of recent planting on the bank near the A19 road. The bank, made of material from the excavated foundations of the power station, screened unsightly works during construction: the trees when grown will provide a good setting for the towers and chimney when seen from distant points.